

BRIGHT SHINY THINGS



EXPANDING THE BOUNDARIES OF ARCHITECTURE IN A MOST EXQUISITE FASHION, A VANCOUVER COUPLE DEMONSTRATES ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND DIVERSIFIES A BROAD SKILL SET THROUGH THE CREATION OF AN INDEPENDENT JEWELRY DESIGN STUDIO.

DESIGNER HK+NP STUDIO

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PHOTOS HK+NP STUDIO, UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED

It is not unusual these days for architects to adopt a multidisciplinary approach to their careers, and the Vancouver-based team of Hiroko Kobayashi and Neil Prakash is no exception. Though partly borne out of necessity—HK+NP Studio arose from the economic downturn of 2008/2009, when their jobs at Nick Milkovich Architects were pared down to essentially half-

ABOVE AN OVERLAPPING ARRAY OF HK+NP STUDIO'S POPULAR TWIST SERIES SILVER BANGLES, THE FIRST PRODUCT DEVELOPED BY HIROKO KOBAYASHI AND NEIL PRAKASH IN VANCOUVER AND PRODUCED IN JAPAN.

time—Kobayashi and Prakash also sought another outlet for their design expertise, one that would bear the fruits of their labours in a shorter time frame than architecture typically permits.

Together now for about five years, they are partners in life as in work since meeting in 2005 as intern architects at Milkovich's Vancouver office. The two have vastly different

backgrounds, a study in contrasts that seems to complement their personal and professional partnership. Kobayashi hails from Japan, and prior to her arrival in Canada in 2004, was schooled and employed in the intensely crowded and hyperkinetic metropolis of Tokyo. Conversely, Prakash was raised in the pastoral prairie landscape of Saskatchewan, and attended architecture school at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg.

After receiving a loan from the Canadian Youth Business Foundation in 2010, the pair embarked on their entrepreneurial initiative full steam. With Kobayashi having some experience in jewelry design on the side while studying architecture and working for Kengo Kuma's firm in Tokyo, she and Prakash felt a jewelry design studio was a viable initial foray not only to expand the range of their design portfolio, but to learn firsthand the business side of the design industry. It is certainly not the first time that architects have worked with jewelry: Frank Gehry has been designing various trinkets for luxury goods purveyor Tiffany & Co. for years.

At the beginning, it made logical sense to find a manufacturer locally in Vancouver or even in Canada, but this was no easy task, as most silversmiths in this country are focused on designing and producing their own work, and not the work of others. Consequently, the couple expanded their scope further afield, deciding to base the production process in India, where Prakash's family had connections to the jewelry trade. But after meeting with the Indian silversmith who had developed the initial prototypes for their first pieces, they were dissatisfied with the level of quality; along with a number of imperfections and blemishes in the finished product, the silver tarnished quickly as a result of an inferior alloy blend. Plan C then took their search to Kobayashi's home country of Japan, where their ideal fabricator was ultimately found. Based in the city of Niigata, located approximately 250 kilometres north of Tokyo on the northwest coast of Honshu Island, Craft Sanyuu is a small family-run business that produces other people's designs as well as their



ABOVE NEIL PRAKASH AND HIROKO KOBAYASHI LAUNCHED THEIR OWN JEWELRY DESIGN STUDIO IN 2010 TO COMPLEMENT THEIR ARCHITECTURAL CAREERS. **BOTTOM** EMBODYING THE MATHEMATICAL CONUNDRUM OF THE MÖBIUS STRIP, THE STRIKINGLY MINIMALIST TWIST SERIES SILVER BANGLE IS AVAILABLE IN THREE SEPARATE FINISHES—MATTE, MIRROR AND SCRATCH.

own. Their impressive level of expertise and knowledge became readily apparent when they were able to immediately identify the problems with the existing prototypes, and suggested improvements to the process to achieve optimal results. Kobayashi and Prakash are more than pleased with the relationship, as the products are flawless in quality, and they are happy to be contributing to the silversmithing industry for which the Niigata region is historically known.

This diversification of practice permits the duo to pursue their design endeavours at a much smaller scale than what they are normally accustomed to. Further, HK+NP Studio allows them a degree of creative freedom and autonomy that they could never achieve at an architecture firm, where the scale and time frame involved in realizing a building project renders each individual just a cog in the machine. While they love working for Milkovich and appreciate the generous mentorship he provides, they can distinguish themselves and emerge from anony-

ity far better through their independent studio.

Fortunately for Kobayashi and Prakash, much of the work they do by day at the architectural firm is very focused on design development and detail; not all architects are so lucky. One of the projects they were recently involved in was the design of a residence for a successful restaurateur in West Vancouver, which took seven years to complete. Designed in the spirit of master builder Arthur Erickson—with whom Nick Milkovich collaborated with professionally for some 40 years—the house possesses such a high degree of custom design that project architect Anne Gingras was dedicated exclusively to the project for the entirety of the seven years. Every square inch of the house is detailed, such that the resulting documentation for all the design details ran to 200 pages.

With this sort of highly finessed training in architecture and custom interior design, it was not difficult to transition to working at a much smaller scale. In fact, the pair finds the two



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LEFT, TOP TO BOTTOM THE Q SERIES IS COMPRISED OF CUFFLINKS, PENDANT, RING AND EARRINGS. KOBAYASHI DEVELOPED THE CUFFLINKS INITIALLY AS A GIFT FOR PRAKASH, HOPING TO ACHIEVE A MORE THREE-DIMENSIONAL SCULPTURAL EFFECT THAN WHAT IS TYPICALLY AVAILABLE. **ABOVE** FOUR IMAGES DEPICT WORKERS AT CRAFT SANYUU IN NIIGATA, JAPAN FASHIONING THE JEWELRY TO HIGHLY EXACTING STANDARDS.

disciplines quite complementary, maintaining that the design process with respect to architecture and jewelry is very similar. Both involve traditional and contemporary techniques of sketching, origami, paper/cardboard/wood modelling, and computer-aided modelling to give their ideas a more concrete three-dimensional form, working back and forth amongst the various media to achieve the optimal solution. For their jewelry designs, the computer models are digitally transmitted to China where plastic models are created through rapid prototyping, after which they are examined and revised for another round of rapid prototyping if necessary, then sent to Japan for fabrication through the creation of a series of molds and wax models prior to the finished silver product. With the jewelry designed in Vancouver, the models produced in China, the finished pieces fabricated in Japan and sold back in Canada and the US, this embodiment of the global village erases the vast geographical distances between the key players in this undertaking as drawings, concepts, models, molds and finished products crisscross continents

many times before the public ever sets eyes on the gleaming silver treasures.

Currently, there are two series available in the range of HK+NP Studio's offerings, Twist and Q. As the first item in their jewelry portfolio, the Twist series bangle was inspired by the "interplay of light reflecting off a water ripple," resulting in a perfect loop of sterling silver with a single twist. Its origins in origami can be detected, as it takes the form of a Möbius strip, the algebraic conundrum that has captivated mathematicians for generations. By incorporating a single twist in a strip of material before joining the ends, the resulting loop form possesses only one side and one edge. Danish design powerhouse Georg Jensen produced a similar bangle in 1968—designed by the late Swedish silversmith and jeweller Vivianna Torun Bülow-Hübe—though it is bolder and less delicate than the HK+NP Studio version. In addition to the bangle, Twist's other manifestations are ring, pendant and earrings, and all are available in three enticing finishes—mirror, scratch, and a honed matte appearance.

The Q series began with a pair of cufflinks

TREVOR LEWIS





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TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT THE ELEGANT SIMPLICITY OF THE TWIST BANGLER CAPTIVATES; THE GRAPHIC RESTRAINT OF THE STAMP'S FONT ON THE INSIDE FACE OF THE BANGLER IS AN APPROPRIATE COMPLEMENT TO THE PERFECTLY EXQUISITE FORM ITSELF. **ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT** THREE IMAGES PROVIDE A GLIMPSE INTO THE PRODUCTION METHOD INVOLVED IN THE CREATION OF THE TWIST SERIES BANGLER: THE ORANGE PLASTIC MOLD FROM WHICH THE GREEN WAX MODEL IS CREATED; THREE BANGLERS SPROUT FROM THE WAX MODEL TREE; THE SILVER BANGLER TREE BEARS THE FRUIT OF THREE BANGLERS, WHICH WILL BE FURTHER REFINED AND POLISHED INTO MATTE, MIRROR AND SCRATCH FINISHES.

that Kobayashi designed as a birthday present for Prakash. With the objective of achieving a more three-dimensional and sculptural quality than what the typical flat two-dimensional cufflink offers, she arrived at a hollow spherical form comprised of grooved silver bands resembling the longitudinal lines of the earth. She named the result “Q” for its spherical form and backing that, when viewed together, resembles the capital letter Q. Moreover, the phonetic sound of the letter Q is also the Japanese word for “sphere”—lending even greater significance to the name of the series.

Although the Twist and Q series are the only two lines currently in full production, they assure me that there is more to come, but the existing prototypes need to be finessed to the pair's exacting standards. Kobayashi and Prakash are finding that in the field of jewelry design—as in architectural design—there can be a startling difference between the seemingly successful prototype or model and the finished

product, particularly when tolerances in various materials prove to be vastly different. For now, these bright shiny things are available in a select range of galleries and shops in Western Canada and the US; they hope to expand their reach eastward in the near future. There is mention that they are also toying with the idea of flatware, since they are already well versed in the process of casting work.

In the two short years since its inception, HK+NP Studio is garnering recognition for its work outside of Canada. At the suggestion of colleague and exhibition designer Kenji Hoshida, they were selected by curator Rachel Kitagawa for inclusion in the current group exhibition entitled *George Nakashima: A Master's Furniture and Philosophy* at the Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience in Seattle, which runs until January 20, 2013. Though the studio's contribution to the show is relatively modest, Kitagawa felt their work possessed a thematically consistent, complement-

ary and shared sensibility with the late Japanese-American architect and furniture maker, George Nakashima (1905-1990).

Besides enabling Kobayashi and Prakash to cut their entrepreneurial teeth, what is clearly achieved through the design studio is a focus on craft, something that is increasingly being lost in architecture, which seems in recent years to favour a technological focus. The pair's eye for detail and process is reminiscent of the way Carlo Scarpa used to work, with the precision and sensitivity of a jeweller, evidenced by the meticulous intricacy of his architectural details. Ideally, Kobayashi and Prakash will continue to transfer the design skills and obsessive attention to detail developed in their architectural work to their independent studio endeavours—and vice versa—in their ongoing parallel careers. **CA**

For more information on HK+NP Studio, please visit www.hkplusnp.com.